More than 20 years later, 1440's Marines work still required Top Secret clearance

# An Air Force Captain Has Disappeared

1/18/84 By Fred Hiatt
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An Air Force captain with access to top-secret military information has been missing since August and was declared a deserter on Dec. 9, Pentagon officials said yesterday.

Capt. William H. Hughes Jr., 33, failed to return to Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico Aug. 1 after a trip to the Netherlands to work with NATO countries testing Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) surveillance planes, an Air Force spokesman, Capt. Johnny Whitaker, said yesterday.

Hughes was declared missing on Aug. 10 and absent without leave on Nov. 9, Whitaker said. His status was changed to "deserter" last month.

Air Force investigators said there is no evidence of foul play or espionage in Hughes' disappearance. Based on transactions Hughes is believed to have carried out at banks in Albuquerque after his European trip, investigators believe that he is in the United States and may have dropped from sight for financial reasons.

"Just because a guy had top-secret clearance doesn't mean he's a spy," an Air Force official said.

Still, officials acknowledged that they are puzzled by the disappearance of an officer who had an exemplary record since enlisting in the Air Force in 1973. Hughes' base commander at first assumed that the captain was being held against his will because nothing in his record foreshadowed trouble, Whitaker said.

Hughes was assigned to the Air Force Operational Test and Evaluation Center at Kirtland, where he was a "lead analyst" of command, control and surveillance systems such as the AWACS, which carry radar and other equipment for monitoring airplane activity in a wide area.

News of his disappearance surfaced after the Air Force sought help from Interpol, the global police intelligence agency, and police departments across the country.